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# De-abbreviations: From Soviet Union to Contemporary Belarus

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The article is dedicated to the study of ludic de-abbreviation, backronymization, or, alternatively, humorous decoding of the well-known abbreviations (which usually serve as names for political parties, countries, universities, and so on). A brief survey of the existing research is provided. Then, despite the fact that de-abbreviation was considered characteristic of the Soviet period, now almost extinct, the author focuses on a case study based on contemporary material, which proves that de-abbreviation is still popular and productive for name-giving. As soon as an abbreviation for the name of Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko, used by the police for safety reasons, appeared in press (2012), it immediately caused dozens of ludic de-abbreviations suggesting alternative names for him. The article focuses on the mechanisms of these renaming de-abbreviations as well as the reasons that caused their peculiarities and multiplicity.

KEYWORDS abbreviation, de-abbreviation, humor, names in political discourse

Notwithstanding quite an extensive body of research on de-abbreviation, there is still no agreement on proper terminology. The author of one of the most comprehensive pieces of research on the subject, A.V. Zenenin (2005), claims that de-abbreviation is possible in two directions: it may be progressive or regressive. In the case of regressive or stylistic de-abbreviation, the abbreviation is decoded back to its initial form; for instance, instead of the shortened form *колхоз* "collective farm" (Russian) the full form *коллективное хозяйство* is used (Zhuravlev, 1982: 95). This is quite normal for the Russian written language from the 1990s onwards (after the Soviet Union collapse), when abbreviations relating to the Soviet Union started to lose their relevance and expanded to the full phrases. In contrast, in the case of progressive decoding, particular de-abbreviation acquires new context-related meaning. Zelenin (2005) also suggests the terms *ludic de-abbreviation* (from Latin *ludus* meaning "game") or *false de-abbreviation*.

Piret Voolaid (2010) introduces the terms *abbreviation riddles*, *abbreviation jokes*; Mikhail Melnichenko (2011) refers to this phenomenon as *de-abbreviation jokes*.

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Other possible terms include *abbreviation parodies*, *humorous abbreviations*, *alternative interpretations of abbreviations*, *quasi abbreviations* (Voolaid, 2010), *relative decoding*, *false decoding* (Ermakova, et al. 1999), *backronymization* (from acronym), *reverse acronym* (McFedries). This article adopts the term *de-abbreviation* to refer only to what A. Zelenin (2005) calls *ludic* or *false de-abbreviation*.

## Abbreviation and de-abbreviation as naming and renaming in Soviet Union

Even though the abbreviations were used long before the appearance of the Soviet Union, according to Alexandra Arkhipova (2007) they were employed only in sacred texts to shorten the names of saints in a prayer or on an icon. Their pragmatics totally changed in the twentieth century. Sergei Kartsevsky (1923) argued that the abbreviation outburst goes back to the beginning of World War I, while Arkhipova (2007) claimed that by that time Russian had taken first place according to the number of abbreviations and shortenings.

Meanwhile, instances of alternative de-abbreviations were identified from the early years of Soviet power. The first recorded humorous de-abbreviations were identified by Mikhail Melnichenko (2011) in his study of jokes of the first half of the twentieth century. At the beginning many de-abbreviations were limited by criminal culture, although soon their usage expanded considerably. It was probably the abbreviation *SSSR* ("USSR") that achieved the most alternative interpretations. Melnichenko (2011) gives seven examples of its de-abbreviation in Russian, while Piret Voolaid (2010) shows twenty-two examples in Russian and Estonian, for instance, *Stalin sõitis seaga ratsa* ("Stalin rode on a pig," Estonian), *Смерть Сталина спасем Россию* ("Stalin's death saves Russia").

Even though Estonian was still widely used in Soviet Estonia, it obviously also reacted to such a large number of abbreviations in Russian. Piret Voolaid (2010) collected 3000 Estonian abbreviation riddles (as she calls them) that survived in unsanctioned collections from Soviet times. M. Melnichenko (2011) collected a body of 1926 Soviet political joke types in Russian from the first half of the twentieth century from memoirs, court cases, and so on, and showed that 6.85 percent of them are based on de-abbreviation; he argues that de-abbreviations were definitely used in oral speech and mottoes (as well as other genres of political folklore) and were mainly transmitted by children and poorly qualified workers. This is reminiscent of the law of folklore genre transmission described by R. Jakobson and P. Bogatyrev (1980) in their article "Folklore as a Special Form of Creation." Unlike literature, and in the same way as language, folklore must pass "censorship." It can only be called folklore when other bearers of tradition adopt it. No wonder that de-abbreviation is often related to jokes, riddles, and other folk genres. Why did ludic de-abbreviations develop and proliferate in the Soviet Union?

First of all, the meaning of an abbreviation was often obscure to speakers and so de-abbreviation may be considered a form of struggle against unclear language material (Voolaid, 2010; Zelenin, 2005). A. Arkhipova (2007) retells the results of the novel experiment held by the sociolinguists to study the language of Red Army soldiers in the 1920s (Lehikoinen, 1990), when the question of their active and passive

vocabulary was researched. It was found that the soldiers did not understand 81 percent of abbreviations, including *СССР* ("USSR") and *РСФСР* ("Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic"). Similarly, in the Estonian case the alternative interpretations of abbreviations also show that the (forced) adoption of foreign culture resulted in a number of sarcastic interpretations (Loorits, 1994).

The second group of reasons is closely connected to the Soviet regime. Humorous de-abbreviations may be considered a response to socio-cultural pressure (Sarv, 1995). Moreover, in fact they could serve as a mechanism of concealing the real meaning. For instance, the well-known musicologist I. I. Sollertinsky used the de-abbreviation *Цецилия Карловна* (a combination of the first name and the patronymic) in order to encode within the name of this imagined relative a possible visit from agents sent by the *ЦК* (the Central Committee, the highest body of the Soviet Communist Party), who could arrest him (Zelenin, 2005: 80). This prompted P. Voolaid (2010) to characterize de-abbreviation as a part of in-group slang, which carries a new meaning and has a key role in subcultural communication. Moreover, non-conformists often used such de-abbreviations with provocative aims, such as in anti-Soviet mottoes mentioned above. De-abbreviations are often negative and targeted at power.

Since de-abbreviations often became part of jokes, the Freudian approach would see them as vehicles for tabooed and inappropriate topics. Similarly, they form an important mechanism in the *carnivalesque*, facilitating digression from the social norms and mockery of official clichés (Bakhtin, 1993). The de-abbreviation may also be explained with the help of incongruity theory related to humor (Raskin, 1985). When the meaning of the official abbreviation and the alternative one of the de-abbreviation do not match, it produces a comic effect. This is why they are easily employed in jokes and anecdotes, receiving additional motivation in such texts. Figure 1 reflects the main themes of names-abbreviations subject to ludic de-abbreviation.

| Main themes of abbreviations | Example of abbreviation | Its ludic de-abbreviation |
|---|---|---|
| Names for political parties and movements | *КПСС, Коммунистическая партия Советского Союза* "Communist Party of the Soviet Union" | *Коммунисты продали советскую систему* "Communists sold the Soviet system" |
| Related to social, political or economical phenomena | *КГБ, Комитет государственной безопасности* "Committee for State Security" | *Кодла грубых бандитов* "The gang of rude bandits" |
| Educational, cultural organisations or enterprises | *РИИИ, Российский институт истории искусств* "Russian University of Arts History" | *Российский институт испуганной интеллигенции* "Russian university of the frightened intelligentsia" (after the mass arrests held there in 1922) |
| Disciplines | *ОБЖ, Основы безопасности жизнедеятельности* "Fundamentals of Safety" | *Общество беременных женщин* "The society of pregnant women" |
| Names for machines, mechanisms | *BMW* | *бандитская машина воров* "The bandit car of thieves" |

FIGURE 1 Main themes of abbreviations subject to ludic de-abbreviation (based on Zelenin 2005).

Ludic de-abbreviations do not always have to carry political connotations or rely on abbreviations. For instance, the word *студент* — "student" — was and still is de-abbreviated as a part of the joke, even though it is not an abbreviation itself: *Сонное Теоретически Умное Дитя Естественно Не желающее Трудиться* — "sleepy, theoretically smart kid who doesn't wish to work."

An overview of existing studies shows that the issue of de-abbreviations has rarely been discussed in English. Nevertheless, it is frequently considered that ludic de-abbreviation blossomed during the Soviet Era due to the totalitarian regime and has almost died out today (Zelenin, 2005). Indeed, the majority of Soviet abbreviations, as well as their decoding, disappeared from general use after the collapse of the USSR. Today in many post-Soviet countries ludic de-abbreviation is a rare case, and even if it exists, it has changed its nature. For instance, in Estonia Soviet abbreviations and consequently de-abbreviations were replaced by ones from English language and the Anglo-American cultural space. For example, *NATO* is de-abbreviated as *natsionalistide amoraalne terroristlik organisatsioon* "amoral terrorist organization of nationalists" (Voolaid, 2010).

If we rely on the point of view that it was the totalitarian regime that caused so many abbreviations and de-abbreviations, it is important to understand that not all post-Soviet countries acquired democracy after the Soviet Union's collapse. Contemporary Belarus has been under a totalitarian regime for nineteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the transitional stage between Soviet and Alexander Lukashenko regime was quite short, many Soviet political features relating to socialism and totalitarianism were inherited by contemporary Belarus, including language and folklore.

## The Belarusian Case

On March 1 2012 the Internet version of the Belarusian opposition newspaper *Наша Ніва* ("Our grain field") published a short report entitled "What the Police Call Lukashenko" (2012). Here is an excerpt translated from Belarusian about what happened on the streets of Minsk one day. Further on I am going to give the translations from Belarusian, Russian, and Trasyanka (a dialect embracing features of Belarusian and Russian):

> On the first spring day we were interviewing citizens in the streets of the city. We went out to the Victors' avenue where we hadn't taken photos for a while. Suddenly the police came up and checked our documents: "Maybe, you'll leave. . ." — "But we've just come, why leave?" — "*ВДЛ* is coming" — "Who?" — "The supreme official person" (*abbreviation from ВДЛ "Высшее должностное лицо"*), the policeman explained. And no clapping [1]!

The report was reprinted on the opposition website <www.charter97.org> (2012) on March 3. Both websites provide the option to comment on the news and in both cases there was an outburst of comments about the articles (26 on *Наша Ніва* and 70 on *www.charter97.org*).

Most of the comments carry evaluations of the articles, of the contemporary political situation in Belarus and sometimes, which is interesting for our case, of the

tradition of the police giving names to officials (coding the president's name for safety reasons, for instance):

> CIS, March 1, 2012 at 20.25
> Why Lukashenko? The status of the supreme official person may be adopted by any head of the supreme executive organ, the Supreme Court, for instance, the Ministers' Council, the President's administration, the Prosecutor General, before there was the CIS committee in Minsk. . . If the traffic police do not know exactly about who is going to come, it's not necessary for them to know.

Among the comments there are rumors dealing with the question of how the name of the president may be also ciphered by the police (*объект Свислочь* ("object Svisloch" [2]), *Нептун* ("Neptune"). Very often users associated the theme of the article with other well-known nicknames for A. Lukashenko. Among them, the most popular nicknames (which are actually abbreviations) are *ШОС*, or *Шоб он сдох* ("wish he died"), *ТНП*, or *Так называемый президент* ("the so-called president").

Moreover, there is a rhyme composed of the abbreviations and other combinations of letters:

> ЁКЛМН ВДЛ
> ТНП И ДЛББ
> ПНХ И Т И ТВ КГБ
> АГЛ ШОС ТБ.

Here is the explanation of each abbreviation:

> ЁКЛМН — a typical combination of letters used as an exclamation which can be roughly translated as "Damn!"
> ВДЛ — abbreviation of "supreme official person" mentioned in the article.
> ТНП — abbreviation of "the so-called president" (*так называемый президент*).
> ДЛББ — an *abjad* (a type of writing system where each symbol always stands for a consonant, leaving the reader to supply the appropriate vowels) from *долбоеб* ("moron").
> ПНХ — an abbreviation of *пошел нахуй* ("fuck you").
> ИТИ — meaning unclear.
> ТВ — TV.
> КГБ — KGB.
> АГЛ — abbreviation of Alexander Grigorjevich Lukashenko.
> ШОС — abbreviation of "Wish he died."
> ТБ — meaning unclear.

However, most of the comments deal with the play on the abbreviation *ВДЛ* ("supreme official person") that appeared in the article, in particular, its ludic de-abbreviation, which became the main means to create comic effect in the comments. Moreover, it was a way of *renaming* the president thus imposing the new qualities on him. There were several mechanisms used for the de-abbreviation, and they can be divided into the following types:

## *1. Initial de-abbreviation*

In the case of initial de-abbreviation only the initial letters of the abbreviation are used. Initial de-abbreviations may be divided into two subtypes; the difference

between them is in the mutual dependence/non-dependence of the words in the phrase creating the de-abbreviation.

In the case of the first subtype, the words composing the de-abbreviation are not interdependent, rather there is a loose combination of words:

*Віця+Дзіма+Ляксандр* "Vitya+Dima+Lyaksandr" (the names of two Lukashenko's sons and his own name are used).

Unlike the previous subtype, in the second one the words are mutually dependent and combine to form a phrase, rather than a loose combination of words. This mechanism is the most productive:

*Всех Достал Лукавый* "The Evil one annoyed everyone."

Lukashenko's surname is similar to the Russian word *лукавый* "evil" (often used in connection with the devil). This similarity was used by the author of the de-abbreviation. The user invented the phrase for de-abbreviation, the elements of which are not loose, but combined into collocation that consists of three words, the initial letters of which were used for the de-abbreviation.

Other examples:

*Вельможный Далай-Лама* "Lordy Dalai-Lama."
*Лицемер власть держащий* "Hypocrite holding the power."
*Высший дебильный лицемер* "The supreme moron hypocrite."
*Всех достал лгун* "The liar annoyed everyone."
*Властьимеющий диктатор Лукашенко* "Keeping the power dictator Lukashenko."
*Восьмисисечный дуремар луковый* "The onion fool with eight tits" (*Lukashenko* sounds similar to "onion" or *луковый*).
*Вельмі дрэнная Людына* "Very bad person".
*Вечный диктатор Лукашенко* "Eternal dictator Lukashenko."

In two of the above cases words consonant with the surname Lukashenko are used (*луковый* "onion," *лукавый* "evil"). I did not include this technique in any separate subtype as these "similarities" are widely used in informal speech and are not innovative in these de-abbreviations.

## 2. In-word de-abbreviation

In some cases, the abbreviation *ВДЛ* can generate de-abbreviations made up from one or several words. Unlike the previous case, these are *not* only initial letters/sounds but also those in the *middle*. They are always *consonants*, for example:

*ВоДоЛей* "Aquarius."

This type falls into two subtypes. The first one is a full consonant de-abbreviation, where *all* consonants of *one* word are used:

*ВиДЛы* most likely the plural from "Weedle" — a Pokémon character.
*ВыДЛо* similar to *быдло*, "cattle."

The second subtype is a partial consonant de-abbreviation, when only several (not all) consonants of the word/words are used. Such de-abbreviations may be created with the help of one word:

*ВалиДоЛ* "validol" (though there are four consonants in this word, only three are used).
*ВыДеЛок* similar to "defected."
*ВыДаЛены* similar to "extracted."
*ВурДаЛак* "vampire," de-abbreviation suggested by two users.
*ВоДоЛаз* "diver."

Or with the help of two words, usually using the consonants of both, with the initial letter *В* ([v]) always adopted from the initial letter of the first word:

*ВеЛикий Дьявол* "Great Devil."
*Вот ДебиЛ* "What a moron."
*Вусатый ДебиЛоид* "Moustached birdbrain."

### 3. Changes in the abbreviation to create the de-abbreviation

In this case a user fails to come up with a good de-abbreviation and changes one letter in the abbreviation. There is always an explanation in this case for the change in the abbreviation, like: "they mixed up the letters," "not . . . but . . .," "it's better to be. . . . " For example:

*ВДМ надо, Волан Де Морт* "It has to be *ВДМ*, VolDeMort."

The abbreviation that appears may be of a previously described type, initial or in-word:

*Не ВДЛ, а ВЛД — ВЛаДыка. Для них он повелитель* "Not *ВДЛ*, but *ВЛД*, the Sovereign, for them he is a lord."

### 4. Using other well-known abbreviations to create a comic effect

The "abbreviation style" requires more abbreviations and evokes other well-known abbreviations in the comments.

*ЧМ, Чемпионат Мира* "World Championship."
*Х, Хоккей* "hockey."
*АГЛ, Александр Григорьевич Лукашенко* "Alexander Grigorjevich Lukashenko."
*ПНХ, Пошел НаХуй* "Fuck you."
*ЗПР, Задержка Психического Развития* "mental retardation."

Thus, the term *ВДЛ*, used as professional slang to name the president within the closed group of the police, escaped by means of the mass media and the Internet to a general audience. In other words, an abbreviation created to hide the name from outsiders, got to those outsiders. As a result, the new and obscure abbreviation, which appeared spontaneously in a different environment, received plenty of alternative interpretations, providing the "real name" of the president. It is curious that initially in the Soviet Union ludic de-abbreviations were widespread mainly in criminal culture. In the contemporary Belarusian case the abbreviation taken for decoding is loaned from police slang, which is very much related to its criminal counterpart.

Unlike the examples from the Soviet Union, the de-abbreviations provided for the name *ВДЛ* probably do not spread further and become actively used on the Internet and in oral communication. They die within local discussion, as spontaneously as they are born. Nevertheless, as could be seen, the discussions also embrace other

widespread names for A. Lukashenko, including those in the form of abbreviation. Generally the tendency to nickname the leader with an abbreviation (also used for the names of the Russian prime minister and president, for instance) reflects the characteristic feature of online communication: shortening names, rather than typing them fully.

The article and further comments on it appeared on two websites that expressed oppositional political views. This influenced the popularity and political character of this de-abbreviation. As has already been mentioned, alternative de-abbreviations were widely used with the aim of agitation against the government in the Soviet Union. The same happened in the Belarusian case. Two anti-government websites published an article with the abbreviation of the name used for A. Lukashenko, and their audience, also set against the president, immediately reacted with alternative de-abbreviations undermining his authority. The comments and alternative de-abbreviations carry aggression against the president and disapproval of his actions. Such a case would have hardly been observed on a pro-presidential website. The names alternative to official abbreviation vested the commentators with power to give their own negative characteristics to the president. Such naming (or renaming) perfectly fits into that particular power discourse and functions in the way that is not much dissimilar to political jokes. Finally, while an abbreviation is usually created according to special language norms, it can be seen that de-abbreviation acquires different forms and is carried out through various mechanisms. It is even possible to change the abbreviation itself to create a funny de-abbreviation.

Thus, this case study shows that even though the scholarly interest in this phenomenon waned, ludic de-abbreviation still exists, although it has acquired new features. The Internet allowed larger numbers of people to participate in the creation of de-abbreviations. The de-abbreviation became a means of giving alternative names to the president, characterizing his personality and rule, as seen by the people. Even though they are not incorporated into riddles or jokes, their functions are very similar. Users come up with a certain alternative meaning for an abbreviation (as in a riddle), which should be humorous (as in a joke), again bringing us to the notion of folklore, which has evidently become much wider than in the times of Bogatyrev and Jakobson.

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## Notes

[1] Clapping became a form of protest for Belarusians. Since people were not allowed to protest officially, get together and talk at meetings, the movement called Revolution in Social Networks organized several unofficial meetings. People got together in the streets, clapping at the regime without saying a single word.

[2] The toponym *Svisloch* is common in Belarus. It is the name of a river and several settlements.

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